

Following the Boss

In our present job market any invitation to interview is treated like gold and any job offer at this point in time would be understandably welcome. Despite our present anxieties, each of us, when evaluating potential career opportunities, will do whatever comes to mind to assess their downside risk potential. The more obvious areas of consideration include financial strength of the company, management stability, potential for successful performance, product/service viability/value proposition, personal chemistry, etc. to name a few.

Many job seekers feel that following a former superior or peers, for that matter, is a very effective way of reducing risk potential in their next career move. Countless stories of career success can be linked directly to opportunities that were extended to us by those we know and trust. However, there are also a large segment of people whose careers have suffered, because they failed to consider the downside risks of such a move. I have talked with many scarred veterans over my years as a search consultant, who have given me an earful of anecdotal proof. When following the boss fails, especially more than once in your career, the effect may be devastating and could injure your future candidacy for the most desirable positions. Moreover, the effects can have broader, more personal impact if you have relocated your family and left a more stable company to accept such an opportunity.

The chemistry that forms among the members of a successful business team is much the same as that of any sports team. It is based upon trust, spirit, camaraderie, familiarity, respect and cooperation. This chemistry and individual behavior may change dramatically when key members are changed, which is the focus of this newsletter.

When considering an offer from a former superior, it is prudent to review your past working relationship with them. Which of their qualities did you admire the most and the least? How did you deal with the latter qualities? How did they rate you in your reviews? How well did they buffer you from the politics that went on at their level and above? Assuming that you enjoyed a successful working relationship with them, which would probably lead them to hire you again, what was the nature of your work? Do you want to do that again?

If you accept an offer from your ex-boss, remember that she or he is your only lifeline in the new company. They may have hired you over the objections of others without your knowledge to rescue their career.

Looking ahead, you then need to answer these questions:

- What is the political climate in this new company?
- What is the tenure of your former superior?
- What is their relationship to their peers and/or to the board?

- Are you able to assess their success in this company?
- Is s/he under heavy deliverable / deadline pressure?
- What is the job you are being asked to do? Can you do it?
- Where does your career go, if s/he leaves within the first year of your employment?
- Does this new company pose a greater business risk than your present employer does?
- Are you resonating with your other interviewers or do they seem aloof and non-committal?

Over my past twenty-eight years in executive search, I have seen candidates who have followed their previous boss, only to suffer circumstances such as these:

- Their manager is under unknown political pressures, which influences their relationship, causing abrupt departure of the subordinate, possibly as a sacrificial lamb.
- Related to the item above, their superior has been with the new company for a short time, has not earned credibility with the “old guard” and does not enjoy the effectiveness held in their previous company. Frustrations flow downhill.
- Their manager is fired for poor performance shortly after hiring the former subordinate, leaving the new hire without a mentor and protector.
- Related to the above item, the senior executive is under severe pressure due to a late or failed project or some unknown political condition. The former subordinate is being hired to save them, but may become a casualty when the more senior executive is terminated, or the employee is laid off when the project is shelved.
- The job being offered by the former boss imposes demands that exceed the former subordinate’s expertise, more than a reasonable stretch objective should allow. The hiring manager is saying, “don’t worry about it, I know you... once you get started, you’ll be fine...” All blame for poor department performance is placed upon the subordinate’s shoulders to allow the more senior executive to save their job.
- The hiring company is having financial difficulties or other conditions not revealed by the former boss during the interview, which ultimately leads to untimely termination of the subordinate.
- The subordinate is fired or laid off for any number of reasons. Their relationship with their former manager has soured, depriving them of a critical work reference.
- The job is not turning out as promised during the interview, for any number of reasons. The subordinate leaves.

In many cases, these kinds of career-damaging situations could have been avoided by some due diligence.

What is the potential for career damage? Over the years, my clients have displayed all of the following reactions to candidates who have previously followed their boss into failure:

- Their career became dead-ended because they allowed their job changes to be driven by someone else's need and not a career plan. In effect, they became a long-term, ad hoc consultant, rather than an executive on their way up.
- They made too many job changes, because someone they knew and trusted would call them offering a fancier title or more money. Once again, this is an example of poor career management and greed.
- They have never had to make it on their own. In recent history, a former supervisor always hired them. When are they going to earn their way? Don't they have any confidence in themselves?
- We can't evaluate their performance. They have worked for the same person for a long time, and because of a now-strained relationship, we can't obtain objective work references.
- They have excellent references, but not from enough people.

There are others, but I think you get the idea.

I am not suggesting that you ignore all job overtures from your former supervisors. I am strongly recommending that you evaluate them as carefully as you would any opportunities with previously unknown management. This is one of the few interview situations where you are in a position of strength. Leverage that to get the information you need to make your decision in order to ensure that it will be less influenced by your emotions.

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